

## Deep Listening: Befriending the Mind-Heart

Turning toward; relaxing into; deepening and savoring.

This morning I'd like to talk about these three phrases.

The theme this month in our UUSS congregation is "Deep Listening." We can't hear deeply in others things we can't hear in ourselves. These three phrases outline a strategy for listening deeply in many life situations. They are helpful in light-spirited moments. And they are particularly valuable in difficult times when we're discouraged, hurt, sad, lonely, or stressed.

This past year our collective situation is more dire than any time I can remember: pandemic, racial inequities, economic breakdown, climate change, sociopathic president, degradation of political discourse, fires, ...

There are great opportunities in difficult times, to be sure. But first we need ways to be with our individual and collective angst.

I want to focus on listening deeply to ourselves so we are better able to listen deeply to the world around us. The strategy I'd like to explore with you is summarized in these three phrases:

- Turning toward whatever life brings us externally or internally.
- Relaxing into any tension we find inside.
- Deepen or look beneath the surface to the subtle, underlying roots of our

experience. What's underneath can be different than how it manifests on the surface. So a deepening process is important. When it goes deep enough, it turns into savoring.

My shorthand for this is: turning toward, relaxing into, and deepening and savoring.

### *Traveling Companion*

These practices are about how we relate to ourselves. I'm not suggesting that self is something that we are or something we own. I am proposing that our self is a traveling companion. Who and what we really are is completely mysterious. But we all have an itinerant chum we hang out with and call "me."

We don't have full control of our thoughts or feelings or this self that moseys along with us.

For example, don't think about a blue panda. ... Is there a blue panda in your mind now? Did you put it there? I don't think so. I put it there by uttering the words "blue panda."

Can you push it out of your mind? Good luck with that.

We have influence on the thoughts, feelings, and moods that waltz through us, but we don't have full control. And if we don't have control of them, then surely, they are not us. They're a companion.

My subtitle this morning is "Befriending the Mind-Heart." I'm

suggesting that our sense of self arises out of our biological wiring and our history. We can enrich our lives by cultivating a clear and kind relationship with this sense of self that travels with us.

Before I make this sound more esoteric than it really is, it might help to give an example of how we can deepen this relationship through these practices of turning toward, relaxing into, and deepening or savoring.

## *Rumble Grumble*

Since I retired, I've led a nine-day meditation retreat every year during which I meet with each meditator or yogi every day to finetune their practice. There is only enough time in a day to meet individually with about 18 yogis. The retreats fill quickly. So several years ago I invited another teacher to co-lead with me. I'll call her "Jill." Together we could accept twice as many people.

Several months before the retreat when we were almost filled to capacity, Jill had an epiphany: she couldn't co-lead with me. She didn't want a long conversation about it. But she wanted me to understand her thoughts and wrote a long email.

Her concern was that I was not a tough enough. Retreats provide a rare opportunity to go deeper. She felt it was important to get yogis to work hard. My experience has been that for every yogi who doesn't put in enough effort, there are 20 who work too hard. Over-efforting makes the body and psyche stiffen. If people back off and let go of the mind's stories, a natural peacefulness can emerge. She, on the other hand, thought my "easing awake" style would lead to a "mellow mush," not the clarity and precision of the Buddha's meditation.

She thought our divergent styles would be confusing and discouraging for the yogis. She said discouraging people was a "mortal sin" — her tongue-in-cheek way of saying she felt strongly about it.

*Since she didn't want to discuss it with me, I just sent her a short note: I was disappointed that it wasn't going to work out. However, since she felt working with me would violate her integrity, I understood that she had to withdraw. I wished she well.*

*Doesn't this sound mature of me?*

*I thought my response was mature, clear, accurate, and would bring closure.*

*It didn't bring closure. In my next meditation, my mind rumbled incessantly: we already had more people than I could manage alone, divergent styles can be enriching, the Buddha himself taught different people different ways, grumble, rumble, grumble. I was angrier than I realized.*

*I ignored the content of the rumbling and turned toward and relaxed into anger itself — relaxed into its very center.*

*It intensified.*

*I kept tuning toward the resentment, relaxing into it and radiating kindness out into the world only to have my mind go into another outburst.*

*From years of practice, I've found that if awareness gets to the subtle conditions underneath, the tension releases. Yet after several days, my mind was still nitpicking furiously. I was stuck. There must've been something I was missing. I opened up more.*

*As I went more deeply into my feelings, I began to feel hurt. Deepening into the center of the hurt, there was a softer tenderness. And in the center of the tenderness was loneliness. I felt unseen. The aloneness seemed ancient and intolerable. But it was clearly there: a deep and familiar abandonment.*

*So I relaxed into the core of the loneliness: listening deeply.*

*A week had gone by now. I was still turning toward and relaxing into, yet the rumbling and nitpicking persisted and morphed into loneliness. I let go of the label "loneliness" and sunk into the felt sense of*

*my experience. It was as if I were a piece of bamboo — hard on the outside but hollow, dark, and dusty in the middle.*

*As I let down into that hollowness, a thought trickled up: Maybe Jill is right. Maybe my practice is mellow mush. Maybe I'm practicing and teaching all wrong.*

*The way my body responded may be surprising: a chuckle arose followed by a broad smile. This was the root condition of the root conditions of the root of the entire episode: I doubted my own practice. Worry and doubt come easily to me even as they hide in the shadows. My body chuckled more as it resonated with the truth of this. It was such a relief to expose the doubt at the core of my disturbance.*

*Instantly I knew exactly what to do. I didn't have to think about it — it was obvious. I'd conduct empirical trials. I'd practice a little harder and notice the effect. Then I'd practice a little softer and notice the effect. I didn't require anybody — any friend, colleague, anyone else — to tell me if my practice was optimal. I didn't even care about my opinion. I'd just experiment and find out directly in my own experience.*

*Suddenly I didn't care what Jill or anyone else thought. I had doubt about my practice and a sure way to address the doubt. I almost laughed out loud. And I was grateful to Jill for stimulating the inner environment that helped this clarity to surface.*

*As I meditated, my body and mind became very deep and peaceful. Everything faded but awareness itself. A deep calm enveloped me.*

## *Everyday Live*

Do you see how that works?

This example is superficially about meditation. I spend a lot of time these days in meditation or mentoring meditators.

But tuning toward, relaxing into, and

deepening are simple, subtle, and universal enough to be effective whether you meditate for five hours a day or five minutes a week during this Sunday worship service.

So I'd like to unpack these three practices and reflect on how to use them in all kinds of situations. And as I do so, I'll give a little background about where these practices came from.

## *Turning Toward*

Most scholars and students of Buddhism agree that the Four Truths are the core of Buddhism. But they aren't capital "T" truths. Rather, they are simple meditation instructions based on practical observations. I refer to the first three as the "Three Essential Practices."

In the Buddhist text, the first truth or first essential practice is literally translated: "There is suffering. Suffering is to be understood."

Notice it doesn't say, "Life is suffering. It just says life *has* suffering." Is there anyone here who has never suffered? Never felt hurt, lonely, sad, angry, or discouraged? ... I didn't think so.

It's a simple, obvious observation. What's important is not the observation but what to do with it. "Suffering is to be understood."

"Understand" does not refer an intellectual analysis but a direct, intuitive knowing — deep listening. If we understand a friend, we know what lifts her up, what brings her down, how she views her life, what she yearns for, etc. The Buddha said that we need to understand suffering deeply and intimately like we might understand a good friend. We aren't going to understand suffering if we are busy trying to fix it, rise above it, push it aside, or distract ourselves from it. To

understand a person or a process or ourselves, we must first turn toward it and open up to take it in on its own terms.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger put it this way: “Imagine an awareness that sees to the heart of suffering with no urge to fix anything. Imagine this awareness is the opposite of indifference.”

## *Relaxing Into*

When we observe pain, suffering, and angst openly, we see tension is the common element in all of them. In Buddhism this is referred to as “*taṇhā*.” Without tension or resistance of some kind, we may experience strong sensations, but we don’t actually suffer.

The second truth or essential practice is literally translated with a very dramatic verb: “There is tension. Tension is to be abandoned.” How do we abandon tension? We relax. The tension might be physical, emotional, or mental. It doesn’t matter. We simply invite it to soften and relax.

In English, the verb “relax” often has an aversive connotation: “Relax man, let it go. Push it away.” Aversion is the opposite of turning toward. So I translate the second practice as “relax into.” We relax any tension, not as a way to distance ourselves from it, but as a way to open more deeply to it. We relax into our angst or into our anger, fear, yearning, or grief as I did with my reaction to Jill’s pulling out.

This allows us to see more deeply into the experience of hurt, grief, or stress and to understand it better.

## *Deepen and Savor*

The third noble truth or third essential practice takes this a step farther. The

language in the text is “*Nirodha* is to be realized.” *Nirodha* is a deep sense of peace and well-being. “Realize” means “to make it real.”

To let it be real, it’s not enough to see superficially what’s going on. We need to see into the core. We need to see deeply what’s going on underneath our experience.

So, for example, if we turn toward and relax into our fear, hurt, or heart ache, we see that underneath there is tenderness. If we aren’t tender — if we’re an emotional brick — we don’t suffer. Anytime we feel distress, there has to be some tenderness underneath it.

If we relax into this tenderness, there is some openness or spaciousness. Without openness, there would be no tenderness.

If we relax deeply into the openness, we may experience a taste of freedom.

We all want the sense of freedom, inner peace, spiritual aliveness, openness of being. Too often we look for it by turning away from difficulty, hardening against hurt, or distracting ourselves. But it doesn’t work — not in the long run. To find the deepest well-being we have turn toward, relax into, and deepen through our experience of difficulty. The only path that works over time goes through the suffering, tenderness, and openness rather than around them.

So rather than fix, transcend, rise above, or push aside our difficulty, we can turn toward, relax into, and deepen.

When we go deep enough, deepening turns into savoring. We let the well-being soak into our bones, like I did with Jill.

In fact, when we turn toward and relax into, sometimes a sense of well-being comes up right away. If so, we just savor it and let it seep into our being.

But if what comes up is uncomfortable, we turn toward and relax into and deepen until we experience the tenderness and openness underneath.

*Again: Imagine an awareness that sees to the heart of suffering with no urge to fix anything. Imagine this awareness is the opposite of indifference.*

Neural scientists have found that we are four times more sensitive to pain than well-being. This is a by-product of evolution. So the Buddha suggests that when we experience even a little uplift, it helps realize it by deepening into it or savoring.

### *Guided Contemplation*

Would you like to try these practices out for a few minutes?

*Think of some situation that is uncomfortable for you. It might be big or small. It might be in relationships, emotions, how you feel about the world, some sense of failure or let down, or being couped up in a pandemic — it could be anything that pulls your spirits down.*

*Close your eyes, and bring to heart some suffering in your life.*

...

*Don't try to think or analyze it. Those can be helpful in some situations. But our thoughts can also be gullible.*

*Instead feel your way into the situation by simply turning toward it in your mind and heart. Open up to it. Let it be as it is. ...*

*Whatever feelings come up, simply notice if there is any tension in them. Don't try to change the situation or what you feel. Just notice any tightness or thickness in the mind or heart and invite it to soften. Relax into it.*

...

*Notice any tenderness underneath. ... Relax into that tenderness. ...*

*Notice any openness or spaciousness beneath the tenderness. ... Relax into the spaciousness. ...*

*And let the spaciousness soak into your being. Savor it. ...*

*May it be so. Blessed be.*